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OBSERVATIONS ON UKRAINIAN EROTIC FOLK SONGS

KRYSTYNA POMORSKA

Why do folk songs please our ear not only by their music but also by their lyrics? Why do they puzzle us although they offer a steady core of imagery and repetitive “lyrical plots”? The feeling of a puzzle seems to come from the impression of a non-sequitur, of some strange dissociation between the two sequences of phenomena a song presents. Indeed, what *is* the connection between “digging a well” and “loving a girl” or that between a “vegetable garden” and “boys” in this popular couplet:

Чи і в вас, як і в нас, на городі буряки,
Чи і в вас, як і в нас, усі хлопці дураки!

It is a particular kind of parallelism consisting of two types of activity that on the surface lack any *tertium comparationis* (or *oppositionis*), whereas parallelism in literature is usually based on a more explicit similarity or contrast. The seeming dissociation between paralleling sequences endows folk songs with a surrealistic touch, comparable to occurrences in written literature where effects are devoid of causes—as, for example, in Gogol’s “The Nose.”

However, one must bear in mind that the basic parallelism in folklore represents a *fixed* inner symbolic pattern. Although not perceived by the general participant, this pattern is nevertheless very old and universal in the Slavic folk heritage, recognized and investigated by ethnographers, folklorists, and linguists. The same symbolism has also been widely used beyond the scope of folklore. Today it can be observed even in the most modern forms of art—e.g., the cinema.¹ The pattern present in the songs selected here can be reduced to the following symbols:

¹ Cf. the Russian film *The Cranes are Flying*, or the recent film, based on Ukrainian folklore tradition, *The White Bird with a Black Mark*, which came out in the school of Dovženko.

or: drinking water
 giving water to a horse } = a sexual act
 digging a well } = an incomplete sexual act (courtship,
 flirtation, etc.)

Due to the symbolic nucleus of the parallelism, all elements in both sequences mentioned above acquire a figurative tinge—in other words, they become polysemantic. But along with these established, nuclear pairs of symbols, all other juxtaposed elements build strong and striking correspondences. Examining these correspondences is the task of the present paper. In so doing, we will disclose the figurative meaning of each variation and reconstruct all the interconnections between the songs. Thus, the richness of the parallelism and consequently the poetic quality of the texts will become apparent.

The three lyrical songs presented here are built around the symbolic pattern described above, except for the heroic verses on Sahajdačnyj, which illustrate some more general and related phenomena.

In the first song the corresponding elements begin on both the phonic and grammatical levels :

I

Копав, копав кірниченьку неділеньки дві,
 Любив, кохав дівчиноньку людям, не собі.

Ой жаль, жаль, непомалу,
 Любив дівчину з малу,
 Любив дівчину з малу,
 Любив, та й не взяв!

Ой, жаль, жаль мені буде
 Візьмуть її люди,
 Візьмуть її люди,
 Моя й не буде!
 Ой жаль, жаль!

II

А вже ж тая кірниченька засорилася,
 А вже ж тая дівчинонька зажурилася.
 Ой жаль, жаль... (refrain)

III

А вже ж з тої кірниченькі орли воду плють,
 А вже ж тую дівчиноньку до віньця ведуть!
 Ой жаль, жаль... (refrain)

IV

Один веде за рученьку, другий за рукав,
 Третій стоїть, гірко плаче, любив, та й не взяв!
 Ой жаль, жаль... (refrain)

In the pair:

Копає кірниченьку
Кохає дівчиноньку

the two juxtaposed verbs, referring to two different activities, are nearly identical in sound and morphology (only one phoneme differentiates them). Their paronomastic closeness results in a semantic relationship according to the principle of so-called poetic etymology. Similarly, the two objects of action—

кірниченька/дівчинонька —

become close due to their morphological identity (stanzas I, II, III). It is noteworthy that whenever the parallel in question is absent, the non-diminutive form of “girl” — *дівчина* — appears (cf. refrain). The full phrase-parallelism, especially of stanzas II and III, supports the whole set of similarities between the two activities presented.

On the referential level the two activities are comparable because of their *negative results*. The Cossack loved a girl for himself, but “the others” took her; he dug the well for people, but “eagles” used it instead. Not only are the results of the actions similar, but so are both acting subjects which either replace the unfortunate protagonist or unjustly appropriate the result of his work : in stanza III the “others” taking the girl to the altar are juxtaposed with the “eagles.” In stanza IV their behavior is described as truly ferocious, each one pulling the girl to his own side : *Один веде за рученьку, другий за рукав....* Thus, humans acquire a complete similarity with rapacious birds — *орли* — especially because of the symbolism of the image : in folklore a sexual act is frequently represented as the killing of a

love object by a predatory bird, *if the male happens to belong to a hostile side*, as is the case in this song.²

Regardless of the basic symbolic tie between the two sequences, one can also see their relative independence and, therefore, still another relationship. One sequence in the song refers to an everyday enterprise whereas the other concerns an activity of higher meaning (love). Any number of songs, humorous verses, proverbs, and sayings are built on such binarism, as, for example, the popular humorous verse :

“Грицю, Грицю — до телят!”
 — Мене ножки болять!
 “Грицю, Грицю — до коров!”
 — Грицю ножки поколов!
 “Грицю, Грицю — до Марусі!”
 — Я сий час же проберуся!

Other examples are the Polish proverb “Niedobry do roboty—dobry do ochoty,” and the saying “Lucky at cards—unlucky in love,” or vice versa. These instances reflect the belief that between certain attitudes, behaviors, or activities there exists a basic relationship in human life. The analyzed song apparently belongs to this repertory. It thus confirms the theory that there is a connection between such forms of folklore as proverbs and bywords and the higher, more developed folk phenomena.³

The famous “heroic” song on Sahajdačnyj discloses a similar relationship, which, indeed, constitutes its leading theme:⁴

I

Ой на горі та женці жнуть, (bis)
 А попід горою,
 Яром-долиною
 Козаки йдуть.
 Гей, долиною,
 Гей, широкою,
 Козаки йдуть.

² Cf. Puškin's *Poltava*, where in his “inner monologue” Marija's father, Kočubej, threatens Mazepa by referring to “ноč”, kogda golubku našu, / ty, staryj koršun, zakleval.”

³ Cf., for example, G. L. Permjakov, *Ot pogovorki do skazki* (Moscow, 1970).

⁴ I. Bunin observed this in his autobiographical novel *Žizn' Arsen'jeva* (New York, 1952).

II

Попереду Дорошенько, (bis)
 Веде свое військо,
 Військо запорізьке,
 Козаченько.
 Гей, долиною,
 Гей, широкою,
 Козаченько.

III

А позаду Сагайдачний, (bis)
 Що проміняв жінку
 На тютюн та люльку,
 Необачний.
 Гей, долиною,
 Гей, широкою,
 Необачний.

IV

“Гей, вернися, Сагайдачний, (bis)
 Візьми свою жінку,
 Віддай тютюн-люльку,
 Необачний!
 Гей, долиною,
 Гей, широкою,
 Необачний!”

V

“Мені з жінкою не возиться, (bis)
 А тютюн та люлька
 Козаку в дорозі
 Знадобиться!
 Гей, долиною,
 Гей, широкою,
 Знадобиться!

The core of the song is a dialogue between the harvesters — *женці* — and *Sahajdačnyj*, the famous leader of the Cossacks, “who exchanged

his wife for a pipe and tobacco." For this he is called (apparently by the harvesters) "unreasonable"—*необачний*—and is asked to turn back and re-exchange the trifles of tobacco and pipe for his wife. In the last stanza, however, the ataman explains that marriage is incompatible with the Cossack way of life—an existence of wanderings and danger. So the wife—*жінка*—belongs to the sphere of harvesters—*женці*—and the two wards accordingly approximate in quality by paronomasia. Sahajdačnyj's act, which is seemingly a joke, proves to be a serious matter: by his "unreasonable" act he has settled his accounts properly, renouncing his private, "everyday" life for the higher activity of Cossackdom. What seems unreasonable to the harvesters, who are common folk, is perfectly reasonable to the Cossacks' famous leader. Accordingly, two corresponding pairs of words are used: the rhyme *Сагайдачний/необачний* and the paronomasia *необачний—знадобиться*.

The items that seem to be props—*тютюн та люлька*—are not at all mere accessories, but meaningful elements within this context. As the jocular Russian proverb says:

Кабак да баба,
Табак да баня-
Одна забава.

Thus "*жінка*" ("*баба*") and "*тютюн*" ("*табак*") become mutual substitutes: both function as *instruments* and *entertainments*.

Through the use of so many binary oppositions and juxtapositions, some of which intersect, the main contrasting parallelism is firmly established. Yet, the two sequences are simultaneously entangled by so many different ties that the general tonality (or "dialogue") of the song becomes extremely variegated: a joke becomes a serious matter and, in general, value judgements fluctuate. This makes the folk song both humorous and heroic—features very typical of Ukrainian folk art.

The landscape, too, is not mere background, but plays an important role in the contrasting parallelism of the whole. Properly simplified to "*гора*" and "*долина*," as is traditional in Slavic folklore, it is then distinctly divided between the harvesters and the Cossacks and thereby given a symbolic role. The mountain—*гора*—is connected with an established pattern of life, that is, with the harvesters—*женці*—and stands for immobility and the static, closed aspects of life. By contrast, the valley—*яр-долина*—represents an open road, a place of movement and action. A similar situation exists in many Ukrainian

lyrical songs, among which the best known is “Стойть гора високая...” where the whole symbolism of life is embodied in a valley while a mountain stands as an immobile witness to the life passing by at its foot. One also finds the same role ascribed to mountains in Medieval iconography, where they are a static decoration, cutting off vision and barring the perspective. It is important to note that in Ukrainian folklore this role for mountains has a geographic motivation, since the Ukraine is a country of steppes and open spaces. By contrast, Polish folk songs ascribe a quite different symbolism to the mountain/valley opposition.⁵

The next song offers the basic device “laid bare”: due to the peculiarities of its structure, both the requisite and symbolic characters of a Cossack and his horse are disclosed. Also, the nature of the Cossack-horse relationship becomes clear.

I

Розпрягайте, хлопці, коні
 Та лягайте спочивати,
 А я піду в сад зелений,
 В сад криниченьку копать.

II

Копав, копав криниченьку
 У зеленому саду...
 Чи не вийде дівчинонька
 Рано-вранці по воду?

III

Вийшла, вийшла дівчинонька
 В сад зелений воду брати,
 А за нею козаченько
 Веде коня напувати.

IV

Просив, просив відеречко —
 Вона йому не дала,

⁵ Cf. “Ty pójdziesz górą / a ja doliną, // Ty zakwitniesz różą, / a ja kaliną,” where the mountain symbolizes a high social position, and the valley, poverty and sadness.

Дарив, дарив з рук колечко,
Вона його не взяла.

V

“Знаю, знаю, дівчинонько,
Чим я тебе розгнівив:
Що я вчора ізвечора
Із другою говорив.

VI

Вона ростом невеличка,
Ще й літами молода,
Руса коса до пояса,
В косі лента голуба.”

The leading voice orders the ordinary workers—хлопці—to terminate their work (= unharness their horses) and take a well-deserved rest after work, whereas he himself turns to a higher activity—courtship and love:

А я піду в сад зелений,
В сад криниченику копать...
...Чи не вийде дівчинонька
Рано-вранці по воду?

In the third stanza, however, the first person shifts to the third, and the Cossack who at the beginning of the song appeared as its main hero (“А я піду в сад зелений...”) disappears from the scene; consequently, stanzas III and IV are built on the third person. In stanza V a Cossack in the first person is introduced once again (“Знаю, знаю, дівчинонько, чим я тебе розгнівив...”). However, it is unclear to whom this voice belongs: to the Cossack from the first stanza, or to an entirely new personage, particularly because the latter’s function and spatial position have changed. Apparently, this is a *bifurcation of the Cossack*, quite frequent in folk songs, which underscores the conventionality of this personage—a steady prop in the lyrical “plot.” Similarly, there appears a bifurcation of the horse, another steady *dramatis persona* in folk songs. The two appearances of the Cossack are connected with two functionally different types of horses. The

first type, which belongs to the working boys, is a genuine workhorse.⁶ This horse (or horses) belongs to the frame pertaining to the motif of everyday life, which has not been developed into a full sequence, as it was in the first song, and has therefore not acquired any symbolic significance. The second type of horse *is* a symbolic one: it is the Cossack's substitute in courtship (his metaphor), and at the same time the Cossack's indispensable part (his metonymy). It is *this* horse that plays a role in courtship: the Cossack asks for a pail, ("просить відеречко") to give water to this animal. Because the parallelism of two realms is incomplete, although some instances of it are present, the non-symbolic casts light on the symbolic, allowing the song to be viewed as a self-explanatory text.

The sound patterns of this song contain some very interesting characteristics. Among its rich sound repetitions is a particular reiteration of the last identical syllables in a neighboring position that creates a kind of internal quasi-rhyme: *руса коса до пояса; or вчора ізвечора*. This phenomenon is made possible by Ukrainian prosody, which has no vowel reduction. Ukrainian folk songs share this phenomenon with Polish folk songs.⁷ Together, they are in polar opposition to those in Russian, whose vowels are strongly reduced and whose folk songs can thus offer only paronomasia or alliteration.

Another pattern of sound repetition in the song being discussed deserves special attention. A close analysis of the dense sound reiteration discloses the following anagrammatical structure:

ко
л
л
ко
ко
ле
с
ле
ко
ко
ко
л
ле
ко

⁶ Another variant of the song reads "Vyprjahajte xlopci voly," which confirms our point.

⁷ Cf. the Polish Christmas carol "A wczora z wieczora...."

л
 ко
 л к
 л ло
 с ко с
 ко с л л

The result is the word *ко — ле — со*, the keyword to the erotic symbolism of the song.

The last song presented here contains the same basic referential core—an unsuccessful courtship—as well as the same symbolic repertory of accessories (water, well, horse) as did the first two songs.

I

Закувала зозуленька на хаті — на розі, гей!
 Приїхали до дівчини три козаки в гості, гей! (bis)

II

Один коня випрягає, другий коня вяже, гей!
 Третій стоїть під віконцем, добрий вечір каже, гей! (bis)

III

“Добрий вечір, стара мати, дай води напиться, гей!
 Кажуть люде — дівка гарна, дозволь подивитися, гей!”
 (bis)

IV

“Вода в сінях у діжочки — іди та й напийся, гей!
 Дівка в хаті на кроваті — іди, подивися, гей!” (bis)

V

“Вода в тебе не холодна, піду до кірниці, гей!
 Дівка в тебе не красива, піду до вдовиці, гей!” (bis)

Yet, this text offers still another variation of the traditional erotic parallelism. The song opens with the device of *graduation*: the image, or, rather, the *functions* of a Cossack are given three different realizations:⁸

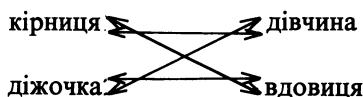
⁸ In this case, the essential role of the gradation is to underscore the conventional character of the Cossack as a personage. Another variant of the song presents it even

Один коня випрягає,
 Другий коня вяже,
 Третій стоїть під віконцем,
 Добрий вечір каже.

The “main” Cossack has been separated from his metaphoric-metonymic horse: it is now he himself who needs water, whereas his horse has only a decorative role. The symbolic character of the horse is thus laid bare. Furthermore, in the request of a third Cossack (as the main function) *water* and *a girl* are immediately juxtaposed: they are objects that will be tested at the same time. The similarity and exchangeability of both is further underscored as each comes in its proper “container”: “вода... у діжочці, ...дівка... на кроваті....” So the symbolic character of water has also been laid bare, and thus this text, too, can be considered self-explanatory.

Where its major devices are laid bare, the text is characterized by an extreme compactness. While in the two songs analyzed above the usual attributes and props were fully developed into a landscape and a ritualistic courtship, here there is neither landscape nor flirtation. The first is substituted by the features of a house, whose interior details prevail (“вода в сінях, дівка в хаті на кроваті”); the second is reduced to a Cossack’s matter-of-fact request.

The outcome is also in agreement with the metapoetic character of the whole, for the Cossack’s choice does not agree with a proper pattern of elements. Since a girl—*дівчина*—is usually juxtaposed with fresh water—*кірница*—hence the widow—*вдовиця*—should be equated with stale water, here coming from an indirect source of water—*діжочка*. But in the analyzed text the sequence is reversed into a chiasm:



This chiasmic structure indicates once again the above-mentioned set of the text toward a “play with devices.”

The samples analyzed here testify to the richness and refinement of Ukrainian folklore. This has made it a particularly rewarding area of study for philologists, ethnographers, linguists, folklorists, and anthropologists from the early Romantic period to our own day. The

more clearly: “Pryjixaly try Kozaki, a vsi try odnaki...,” *Malorossijskija pesni, izdannya M. Maksimovičem* (Moscow, 1824), p. 713.

special attraction of Ukrainian folklore was responsible for the creation of a “Ukrainian school” in Polish Romanticism that included poets such as Bohdan Zaleski and Antoni Malczewski.

The field has been enhanced by the great interest and care for folklore among Ukrainian scholars. Myxajlo Maksymovych, the brilliant scientist and philologist, collected and published the first volume of Ukrainian songs as early as 1827;⁹ in the introduction to this work he offered both sociological and philological analyses of its contents. The achievements of Oleksandr Potebnja as linguist and literary theoretician are well known; however, one should remember that he was also one of the world’s greatest folklorists and ethnologists. His study, today a bibliographical rarity, *Объяснения малороссийских и среднных народных песен*, remains a model for the structural analysis of folklore and serves as a methodological paradigm to the present day. During the twentieth century such individuals as the devoted collector of Hucul folklore Jurij Fed’kovic, Oleksandr Rubec’, Filaret Kolessa, and Klyment Kvitka produced interesting collections and studies on various forms of Ukrainian folklore. The contemporary collections and studies of the Canadian linguist Jaroslav Rudnyc’kyj show that even displaced from its native land, Ukrainian folk art can develop and grow.

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Translations of the songs analyzed¹⁰

I

I dug, I dug a well one week, two weeks,
I liked, I loved a girl—but for the others, not for myself.

O, sad, very sad will I be,
I loved a girl since childhood,
I loved a girl since childhood,
I loved—but did not take her.

O sad, sad, will I be,
The other people will take her,
The other people will take her,
She won’t be mine!
O, sad, sad!

⁹ At the time Maksymovych was twenty-three years old.

¹⁰ The songs analyzed in the text were recorded by the author in the Poltava region of the Ukraine. The translations are also by the author.

II

And that well has now been littered,
And that girl has now been grieved.

(Refrain)

III

And from that well eagles now drink water,
And that girl is now being led to the altar.

(Refrain)

IV

One is leading her by the hand, the other—by the sleeve,
The third one is standing by and crying bitterly: he loved her, but didn't take her.

(Refrain)

I

There, on the mountain, the harvesters are harvesting, (bis)
And by the mountain,
By a ravine, by a valley,
The Cossacks are going.
There, by a valley,
There, by a wide one,
The Cossacks are going.

II

In front of them there is Dorošenko, (bis)
He is leading his forces,
The army of Zaporože,
The good Cossack.
There, by a valley,
There, by a wide one,
The good Cossack.

III

And in the back there is Sahajdačnyj, (bis)
Who exchanged his wife
For a pipe and tobacco,
The unreasonable one.
There, by a valley,
There, by a wide one,
The unreasonable one.

IV

“Hey, come back, Sahajdačnyj, (bis)
Take your wife,
Return the pipe and tobacco,
You unreasonable one!”

There by a valley,
There, by a wide one,
You unreasonable one.

V

"I won't bother with a wife, (bis)
And a pipe and tobacco
For a Cossack on the road
Will be useful."
There, by a valley,
There, by a wide one,
Will be useful!

I

Unharness your horses, boys,
And lie down for a rest,
And I will go to a green orchard,
To an orchard, to dig a well.

II

I dug, I dug a well
In a green orchard,
Will a girl come out,
Early in the morning, for water?

III

There came, there came a girl
Early in the morning to take water,
And after her there comes a Cossack
To give water to his horse.

IV

He asked her, and asked her for a bucket,
But she didn't give it to him,
He tried and tried to give her a ring,
But she didn't take it from him.

V

"I know, I know, my girl,
With what I angered you:
Because last evening
I talked with another.

VI

She is not very tall,
She is young in age,
Her blond braid is long and down to her waist,
In her braid there is a blue ribbon."

I

A cuckoo cried out on the hut—on the corner,
There came three Cossacks to visit a girl.

II

One is unharnessing a horse, the other is tying up a horse,
The third one is standing by a window—he says, “Good-evening.”

III

“Good-evening, old mother, give me some water to drink,
People say your girl is pretty, let me take a look.”

IV

“Water is in the hallway, in a pot, go and take a drink.
The girl is in the room, on her bed, go and take a look.”

V

“Your water is not cold, I’ll go to a well.
Your girl is not pretty, I’ll go to a widow.”